

Does Buddhism Have a Role in Politics?

[Perth Conf. 2006]

Professor Dhammavihari Thera

Preliminary Observations

I must commence by declaring before this august assembly that Buddhism is essentially politics, politics, politics. It is of the people, for the people and by the people. Buddhism has its genesis down on earth here, with no allegiance to or a mandate from, any authority outside. Buddhists have to plan things for themselves, collectively and individually.

Politics, anywhere and everywhere, must collectively and mark my words, not severally, concern itself with the safety and security of the people, i.e. the subjects [progeny = *prajā*] as a whole who come within its purview, regulate their lives, and stimulate their growth both for the benefit of themselves and of the community at large. Buddhists, in all their activities, cannot at any stage, forget the further scene of their lives beyond death.

The briefest definition of Politics would read as 'the art and science of government'. This immediately implies the inter-relatedness between the two concepts of those who govern and those who are governed, i.e. 'people of a land' and 'those who rule over them'. Among the primary concerns of Buddhism as a religion is the wish to relate, in perfect harmony to one another, every item in the universe, particularly living things both human and animal. This composite group is all the time referred to in Buddhist texts as *sattā*, its etymological meaning being living things. In this grouping, the humans unquestionably get a higher grading as those having a capacity to judge, well above animals who act merely on their impulsive reflexes. Buddhist texts say that 'humans are called *manussa* because of the higher grade capacity of their minds or *mana* to think' =

manassa ussannatāya manussā [VvA. 18 & KhpA. 123].

As in the most modern scientific thinking of Biophilia Hypothesis, Buddhism began its religio-philosophic thinking, reckoning all life both human and animal as one. To them, animals were never created, on second thoughts, meant by the creator, to be consumed by man as food, or for man to make use of their derivative products like skins and furs. The biota of the world exists on its own right to live, contributing in the process, to the survival of totality of life all around us. Note what the scientific world tell us about our callous disregard of this area.

The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are lest likely to forgive us.

Biophilia Hypothesis p.4

Presentation of thesis

Among the sacred books of the Buddhists, the Metta Sutta of the Suttanipāta, more than twenty-five centuries ago, highlights the boundless Buddhist attitude to all forms of life in the universe, without any distinctions or discrimination. This is where Buddhist thinking, in relation to all life in the universe, has to begin. The Buddha does not begin his life of religious awareness with the idea of a father in heaven, creating the world and inserting man therein, with everything else in the world subordinated to man. Nor has man to submit himself to a greater power above him elsewhere. The Buddha is himself born into a world where life already exists. Even while being a forerunner in the chain of world religions, it is very much to the credit of the Buddha as the originator of a very deviant line of religious thinking that he never felt the need to commence with a Book of Genesis.

He begins with a study of man, or more precisely of the pathology of man, as he found him in his immediate neighbourhood. What is interesting and important

to note here is that he commences his search unquestionably with a pre-enlightenment awareness of the human and his problems. [Please note what he says: *pubbe'va me bhikkhave saṃbodhā anabhi-saṃbuddhassa bodhisattass'eva sato etad-ahosi* at SN.II.10]. There was something special about what he saw in the human predicament.

These problems of man are both mundane and related to his life in the world in which he lives, like decay, disease and death as well as frustrations, disappointments and consequent states of depression. There is yet another dimension of a life beyond death. Nevertheless, the Buddha showed no concern for a Kingdom of God, above or anywhere, as a way out of the present. It had to be with and within man himself, and in his own domain. Its transcendence lies in getting out of this personal and individual continuance of the mortal in this human life process.

As the Bodhisatta, he saw indeed what others had seen for ages before him, but with a keener and more penetrative vision. What he saw as realities in the life of the human, in his decay, disease and death, he puts into real focus with his acceptance of ceaseless life continuance beyond death. Fail not to take note of the very near acceptance of this position today by experts in the medical profession and the more open-minded psychologists and philosophers.

It is this trans-saṃsāric vision of life in Buddhism, of yet another real life beyond death, not very different to the present, which gives all areas of its teachings from ethics and moral philosophy to sociological and economic considerations a special level of humane and spiritual dignity. This is what made the Buddha dispatch his first batch of disciples as missionaries to work for the weal and welfare of mankind, with this two-dimensional growth and development in mind, including unmistakably even the extra-terrestrial beings: *atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ*.

With these preliminary observations about the overall outlook of Buddhism as

a religious system, we shall now turn to examine its basic philosophy in this area of human activity, namely politics. We discover here two major areas. One deals with ideas and concepts derived from the then known world of India. Around the Buddha's own native kingdom, there were larger and smaller states ruled over by monarchs or *rājās*, like Pasenadi and Bimbisāra. There were also at the same time smaller republics, like that of Vajjis. Their successes and failures were perhaps intimately known to the Bodhisatta while he was still a young prince. This might have been acquired through the court education popular among the royal families, often presided over by counsellors who went under the name *purohita*. A great deal of worldly wisdom seems to have been packed within these.

The Buddha, after his enlightenment, had to be seriously concerned in his religious mission, with every area of activity of the human, both man and woman. Unlike in the Indian thinking of the Manusmṛti, the Buddhists could not send women to heaven merely because they were subservient to their husbands: *patim śuśrūṣtate yena tena svarge mahīyate*. In this life time, the manner in which men and women of the world conducted themselves, mattered a great deal in Buddhism, whether they were rulers who sat high on thrones and ruled those below, with justifiably adequate magnanimity and benevolence or not. It is no secret to any one that Buddhist teachings insisted that rulers of the land had to bring joy to the hearts of the people over whom they ruled: *janaṃ rañjayati ti rājā*. A ruler had to look upon his subjects as a totality, a composite whole. Divide and rule or party politics were hardly conceived.

On the other hand, there were the subjects over whom the rulers had authority, some who were under-paid commoners who toiled for others, being under-privileged for whatever reason. Buddhist teachings in the area of human labour, employment, wages, provision of food, entertainment and health care and respect for women, show a great concern for these exploited persons in society. More than two and a half millennia ago, the tragic and at the same time the

menacing problem of haves and have-nots had been anticipated by the Buddha and very realistically he handled the situation when he declared the joys of sharing one's possessions with those who possessed less: *dāna-saṃvibhāgarato*.

Evidence of many Buddhist suttas like the Maṅgala, Vasala, Parābhava and Singālovāda show the genuine desire of the Buddha to groom and standardise the human-raw-material before putting it into the mill of governance and social management. Governing is nothing but handling the people of a land, by its leadership, so that they become productive and ungrudgingly yield to the land of their birth the maximum benefits out of their man power. It is not the goodness of man for its own sake but for what it yields for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

Now let us begin, taking a look at where politics surfaces in Buddhism for the first time. We consider the concept of the Righteous King or *Rājā Cakkavatti* a very appropriate point of entry. *Cakkavatti* means Universal Monarch or World Ruler who legendarily gets command over the entire earth from end to end: *Vijitāvī Cāturanto* [DN. I. 88 f.]. He conquers not by force of arms [*adaṇḍena asatthena abhivijjya* loc. cit] and is symbolically the upholder of righteousness in the world: *dhammiko dhammarājā* [loc. cit.].

Two primary virtues emerge out of his character. As the Universal Monarch, he rejects aggressive monopolies in any area of human activity. Respecting personal identities, he sponsors liberalism of political creeds. He expects the provincial rulers to continue ruling as they did before [*yathā-bhuttañca bhujjatha*. DN.III.63]. But this is on the firm determination that moral goodness shall prevail everywhere among mankind. No god above shall issue commands to man on earth to override the authority of another. That would appear to him unthinkably blasphemous.

Nevertheless, he wants all regional rulers among whom he decentralises power to maintain absolute moral goodness among mankind. It is not to be

missed that the command to maintain moral goodness in the land is not a mere request, left in the hands of the subjects. It is not self-acceptance as with *samādiyāmi* of *pañca-sīla*. It carries with it a legal authority, with a command from the very top for law enforcement, saying that within each territory no life should be destroyed [*pāṇo na hantabbo* DN.III.62], none shall be dispossessed of their legitimately acquired property [*adinnaṃ na adātabbaṃ* loc. cit.] etc. To us, this means that any breach of these injunctions legally leads to prosecution and possible punishment. The area of law enforcement for moral goodness covers the entire territory of *pañca-sīla* which is a vital limb of the Buddhist religion. It should certainly delight the sober thinkers of the world today that the domain of *pañca-sīla* embodied in Buddhism which dates back to more than two and a half millennia ago considerably antedates the vision of the sponsors of today's human rights.

If the basic definition of politics as 'the art and science of government' is deemed even reasonably adequate, we would consider the profound and magnanimous thinking that is embodied in this legend of the BUDDHIST CAKKAVATTI would be a grand basis for a global philosophy of politics. In recent years, we discern what we would consider a sensible return to religion as a new dimension for the guidance of political thinking. Oxford University Press publication, 1994, under the title RELIGION, THE MISSING DIMENSION OF STATECRAFT by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, we believe, is indicative of this trend.

Cakkavattisāhanāda Sutta of the Digha Nikaya [DN.III. 61] indicates the need for rulers of the land to visit from time to time [*kālena kālaṃ*] their religious men, not those who merely hold statutory positions of power and prestige in clerical circles, but those honest in their own religiousness and self culture, and consult them with regard to the conduct and culture of rulers which would benefit the state and the people.

Buddhism also requires rulers to uphold the *dhamma* of the land, i.e. of the

vast majority of the people which is their inalienable cultural heritage in which they have grown up. It is religion which generates the cultural content of a people. We do not believe it is *vice versa*. The above sutta in detailing the duties and obligations of a ruler, insists on the respect the rulers show to the religion of the land and their reliance on its values: *dhammaṃ garu-karonto dhammaṃ manento... dhammā' dhipateyyo* [loc. cit.] details out these.]

Far from having expansionist aspirations of annexing territories all around one's state, a just and righteous ruler, according to Buddhist teachings, [*dhammiko dhamma-rājā*] must provide safety and security to humans of all ranks within his territory against terrorists and aggressors [*rakkhāvaraṇa-guttiṃ saṃvidhahassu*. loc. cit.], including fauna and flora in the land [*miga-pakkhīsu*. loc. cit.].

Finally, one more area of political interest which Buddhism shows is the meaningful and profitable utilisation of man-power resources in the land. The Kūṭadanta Sutta [DN,I.135] explains how man power resources of the land could be profitably utilised by correct modes of employment, with incentives and inducements wherever necessary. Skills of persons are to be correctly utilised and temperaments and aptitudes of people are to be duly recognised and respected.

Thus we see Buddhism's role in politics is two-sided. On the one hand, the rulers have primarily to be educated via a religio-cultural policy of the land, giving them a sense of direction within which the development of the land must be undertaken. Their personal character has to be unquestionably above board, being within the perimeter of *dharma* i.e. being *dhammiko*. The subjects being delighted with the policies of the state, should be totally supportive of state policies.

We believe by now we have indicated a reasonable segment of the vast input of the vibrantly active political thinking Buddhist teachings provide. It is

fundamentally important that we neither miss nor underrate its basic human element, its share in the elevation of the human to something nobler and more dignified than the *pithecanthropos erectus*. Buddhist political thinking cannot and never should be made to evolve to contribute towards the production of a Jenghis Khan or a Hiroshima bomb.